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# Colorblind: How Cable News and the “Cult of Objectivity” Normalized Racism in Donald Trump’s Presidential Campaign

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Colorblind:  
How Cable News and the “Cult of Objectivity” Normalized Racism in Donald Trump’s  
Presidential Campaign

by

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Gardner-Webb University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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COLOBLIND: HOW CABLE NEWS AND THE “CULT OF OBJECTIVITY”

NORMALIZED RACISM IN DONALD TRUMP’S PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Abstract

This thesis explores the connection between genre and the normalization of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump’s varied racist, sexist, and xenophobic comments during the height of the 2016 General Election. Examining the genre of cable news and the network CNN specifically, this thesis analyzes both the broad genre-specific elements and specific instances during CNN’s panel discussions where that normalization occurred. Combining Carolyn Miller’s framework for deconstructing genre, Classical rhetorical devices like stasis theory, Judith Butler’s interpretation of performativity, and pertinent political and historical context, this thesis highlights and examines the impact the “cult of objectivity” had on CNN’s normalization of Donald Trump, with implications for the overall genre.

*Keywords:* genre, racism, Donald Trump, CNN, rhetorical analysis, performativity, cult of objectivity

## I. Introduction

“The liberty of the press is essential to the security of freedom in a state: it ought not, therefore, to be restrained in this commonwealth.” – John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Bowdoin, *Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, Article XVI

“In all seriousness, functioning democracies rely more on norms than laws and those norms are being degraded with terrifying abandon.” – Chris Hayes, in a Tweet from March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

A healthy democracy is held together by more than universal suffrage and civic participation. It's held together by cultural and rhetorical norms, and one of the primary arbiters of those norms has always been the media. From print to television to Twitter, opinions are shaped and standards are set. Even the Founding Fathers considered the existence of a free press so essential that they enshrined it in the Constitution. So the extent to which a free press has shaped the future of our country demands our attention, because the manner in which it functions, as well as its health, is inextricably linked to the health of an entire nation.

From the very first days of our nation, we had a thriving press, envisioned and imbued by the founders, those children of the Enlightenment, with the “right and duty...to serve as an extralegal check on the government” (Siebert et al 56). Of course, it was also full of “partisanship, invective, and unrestraint” and incredibly diffuse, with a multitude of presses across the original colonies (Siebert et al 76). This fostered the libertarian principles of a free press that originated during the Enlightenment, rooted in unrestrained access to all viewpoints, but as time went on and technology advanced, the power of the press became concentrated in just a handful of powerful publishers and the mainstream press remains so today. However, then as

now, libertarianism remained a tremendous influence and thus created the “cult of objectivity,” a kind of offshoot of its parent theory and one which I am focused on here.

And what about those norms I referenced? Well, Webster’s Dictionary defines them as “standards of proper or acceptable behavior,” and indeed, the norms of political campaigning have acted as a stabilizing force for decades. When Klansman David Duke broke with these norms in his quest for higher office in Louisiana in the late 1980s, then President George H.W. Bush offered a strong rebuke, and Duke eventually met his fate at the ballot box. Yet, for the last year, one presidential candidate has consistently thrown the most basic norms of campaigning, and arguably morality, out the window rhetorically speaking. In conjunction with the majority of the press, and in particular cable news, he’s set a dangerous precedent, validating and normalizing, simply by making them partisan and therefore up for debate, xenophobic, racist, sexist, ableist, and anti-Semitic stances, along with other, perhaps less dangerous but still destabilizing conspiracy theories. That candidate’s name is Donald Trump.

From the time it became clear that Donald Trump would be the Republican nominee for President, his aforementioned racist, sexist, etc. comments took on new meaning. While they had begun as early as his campaign announcement in July of 2015, assuming the mantle of de-facto Republican nominee gave weight to his words. They stopped being outlandish statements from a flash-in-the-pan primary contender, ala Herman Cain in 2012, and became representative of the Republican Party, or at least their leadership. That’s why, when it comes to the specific examples I’ll be analyzing here, I’m focusing on the late spring of 2016, going into the final presidential debate in October.

Those blatantly racist statements and actions, from calling Mexican immigrants murderers and rapists to suggesting (and not in jest, as we now know) banning all Muslims from

entering the country, were often regarded as gaffes, a political term used to categorize “missteps, miscalculations, and misstatements” (Graham), in the lead-up to his nomination. Such classification though is not the only, or even the primary form of normalization, which can also be understood in this context as treating each of the aforementioned statements as if it is merely “the latest blip in the news cycle,” to be quickly answered for, then forgotten (Garfield). Veteran journalist Bob Garfield explains the idea in detail, saying, “Look, by its nature, journalism subordinates old news to the latest development. But, in this case, being slave to the fresh angle is simple malpractice because every moment spent on Trump policy and process buries the lead.” Essentially, he’s arguing that normalization is two-fold, encompassing both the initial coverage of Trump’s outlandish statements, the partisan debates referenced earlier, as well as how they are subsumed into the twenty-four hour news cycle. To put it rather bluntly, with Trump, “the lead is that a man who wants to build a wall, who wants to ban Muslims, who sees women only as potential vessels for his—“no problem there, I assure you”—could be the president of the United States. It was the lead in July. It is the lead now. It will be the lead in November” (Garfield). The media and press, but again, particularly cable news, thus normalize these statements; resulting in a reality where they are regarded as commensurate with Hillary Clinton’s handling of her e-mail controversy, which the news media’s coverage of could itself encompass a thesis of its own. In doing so, media outlets like CNN facilitate the breaking of long-held norms, destabilizing long-held structures.

But how specifically is the press normalizing Donald Trump’s candidacy? Yes, they try to balance coverage of his outrageous statements with Clinton scandals or, failing that, give airtime to Trump campaign surrogates who will defend anything he says, but the specific ways they accomplish this balance is another matter. That is the purpose of my analysis, and it begins

by talking about bias. While it might oftentimes be more accurate to ask how the media is biased rather than *if* it is biased, the prevailing question to my mind is how one medium's attempt to be unbiased can actually result in the far more problematic, even dangerous, coverage. In the case of Donald Trump and cable news, though here I'll be focusing exclusively on CNN, this is the question. Through an in-depth rhetorical analysis of the coverage of multiple instances of Trump's most notorious incidences of racism, rooted in the principles of classical rhetoric as well as visual rhetoric and placed within the context of the broader defining, genre-specific characteristics of cable news, that question of "how?" can be answered.

That begins with libertarian journalistic principles, which were referenced above and will be expanded on in later chapters. These principles birthed the "cult of objectivity" that has dominated the news media since the mid-century, dictating the reporting practices of the so-called "Big Three" networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS, and which are wholly unsuitable for covering Donald Trump because they are wholly unsuitable to tackling issues of race, which are themselves deeply embedded in the candidacy, from its successes and controversies to the coverage, of Donald Trump. That is because when it comes to discussing racism, the "the conventions and normative standards that supposedly ensure the proper output of information that can be deemed journalistic," encompassing such standards "as objectivity, fairness, accuracy, verification and editorial judgement, as well as those that should be absent from the practice, such as sensationalism, partisanship, bias, speculation and assertion" by their very nature lend credence to the side espousing racist viewpoints that cannot and should not be countenanced in a moral society (Jones, *The 'New' News...* 147). Or as journalist Jamelle Bouie more colorfully puts it, "For every display of 'pro-truth' bias, there are a dozen examples of mindless coverage, as reporters present racist rhetoric as simple 'controversy' or frame anti-

Semitic propaganda as a ‘he said/she said’ dispute.” The danger of that kind of coverage and the animus behind this project is that it is “how ideas and symbols that were once considered beyond the pale become less so. They leave the realm of taboo and enter the world of partisan combat, where ethics and meaning are a function of tribal identity” (Bouie). Allowing Jeffery Lord to defend his preferred candidate’s ambivalent acceptance of prominent white nationalists’ support and praise is doing precisely that, and normalizing white nationalism is nothing short of imperiling our democracy.

Of course, neither Trump’s candidacy nor the accompanying coverage occurs in a vacuum, so a full exploration requires one to go beyond journalism, cable news as a genre, and CNN as a network, despite both subjects’ centrality to my overall argument, and into the history of race-based coverage in America. Focusing on the Civil Rights Movement and its press coverage illuminates important parallels between the coverage then and now. Though perhaps more importantly, it also illuminates where the coverage diverges, highlighting the constraints and failures of the cable news genre in regards to race and other fundamental social issues. Understanding how we got to where we are with Trump is contingent on understanding what came before.

Additionally, Trump’s candidacy cannot be fairly analyzed without at least acknowledging the unique circumstances of the race. In this I am referring to his opponent, Hillary Clinton, who brought with her both gender bias and the so-called “Clinton Rules,” unwritten norms dealing with how routine political machinations are covered and presented to the public, which incentivized and exacerbated all the tenets of “the cult of objectivity,” or “both sides-ism,” that is, the libertarian theory of the press. Given the literal volumes of work that have been written on gender and politics, and with influence far beyond the press, my main focus



is then on the “Clinton Rules.” I would not presume to argue that the normalization of racism in the presidential election of 2016 was a natural result of a genre with the features of cable news rather than a black swan event, to use an appropriately political term, created by a perfect storm of two candidates who both garnered specific and unique coverage for very different reasons, without addressing the opposing viewpoint in question.

## I. Methods of Examination

### i. Genre as a Framework: Origin and Characteristics

There is quite a bit of theory and methodology at work here, but given that it is foundational to everything else, simply by virtue of being a couple-of-thousand years old, I want to start by exploring some classical rhetorical devices. I say some, not all, because not only would that be a book unto itself, but the fact is that the genre-specific elements of cable news are defined as much by the specific rhetorical devices they fail to use as if by those they actually do use. That is, in creating a facsimile of debate, one which is underwritten by both legitimate journalistic principles and a mere performance of those principles, cable news makes use of classical rhetorical devices in order to normalize that which cannot be normalized, e.g. appearing ambivalent about the support of David Duke and the KKK. Crucially, they also mimic classical debate styles while simultaneously perverting or forgetting its essential features. How exactly they do this is addressed in detail in the following section, but it is necessary to first provide an overview of those features and their definitions since normalization through debate does not just happen, but rather is successfully facilitated through the use of these features. Again, since there are enough rhetorical devices to fill an encyclopedia, I will be focusing on commonplaces, ideology, the four questions, and the common topics.

Beginning with commonplaces and ideology, which are intricately linked, I want to first clarify what ideology means in the context of rhetoric, as it is used a bit differently in other disciplines. For rhetoricians, the term is used to “name networks of interpretation,” networks that are comprised of a “coherent set of beliefs that people use to understand events and the behavior” of others (Crowley and Hawhee 18). Ideology is “the stuff with which rhetors work” because it’s through ideology that we understand ourselves (Crowley and Hawhee 19), our

relationship to our environment, and how to value both. Ideologies are themselves made up of commonplaces, which are statements that, as you might guess, are “commonly believed by members of a community” (Crowley and Hawhee 19). Some contemporary examples include “well-worn slogans,” like “Main Street vs. Wall Street” or “Coastal Elite,” as well as “beliefs drawn from sophisticated texts that encapsulate key beliefs of a given ideology” (Crowley and Hawhee 100). Crucially, commonplaces do not necessarily have to be true, just so deeply embedded in a community’s assumptions that they rarely, if ever, get examined rhetorically (Crowley and Hawhee 19). Furthermore, in part because of this lack of truthfulness, ideologies are seldom internally consistent, often being contradictory in nature and in disagreement with empirical data (Crowley and Hawhee 20). When ideology and commonplaces work together though, that is, when commonplaces are “yoked together, strung, or chained into a line of argument” (Crowley and Hawhee 109), they form another type reasoning, pertinent to the subject matter here, called an ideologic. Given all this, commonplaces are commonly contested by different communities, and when they are, they’re called issues, which is why “the point of rhetoric is to help people examine and perhaps achieve agreement about issues” (Crowley and Hawhee 20).

In achieving agreement on those issues, the four questions and the common topics are useful rhetorical devices for producing productive arguments that, one would hope, results in the two sides finding some common ground. Or rather, this is the goal in classical rhetoric. While it’s easy to see a connection between political campaigns, particularly Donald Trump’s, and classical devices like commonplaces once you know what they are, the four questions and the common topics are more opaque in this regard. There aren’t any easy modern examples like “Coastal Elite,” but something like the common topic of conjecture is fundamental to the work of

this thesis precisely because examining the rhetorical subjectivity of truth within specific communities allows us to better examine a political campaign and political coverage where truth itself seems up for debate and changes so often.

As for the four questions themselves, they are simply, conjecture, definition, quality, and policy. These categories questions about whether something exists or happened, what kind of thing it is, whether it was right or wrong, and what should be done, respectively (Crowley and Hawhee 64). Questions of quality are often the most subjective, but sometimes, as is the case with the genre of cable news, the first question, whether the issue in question is even real, is not addressed. The common topics most useful to my discussion on the other hand, include conjecture, degree, and possibility though as it pertains specifically to my analysis here, the common topic of conjecture is most relevant. Conjecture, concerned as it with uncovering what is seemingly factual and therefore objective, can itself be relative and selective in that it relies on “educated guesses” and speculation on both the past and the future (Crowley and Hawhee 90). Generally though, it describes how people typically believe and behave (Crowley and Hawhee 91). For its part, degree allows for comparison between two issues.

So what do journalists believe? How do they behave? This is necessary to understand both because of the transient truth at work in the Trump campaign, but also to illustrate Carolyn Miller’s framework for genre, central to my analysis and described in detail later, which I apply to cable news and CNN more specifically. Of course, to apply that framework I need something to apply it to, the genre at work if you will. To that end, let’s discuss some of the hallmarks of the libertarian theory of the press, the system of belief for cable news journalists.

What is the libertarian theory of the press? Essentially, it is a set of principles which informs the actions and decisions made by journalists, editors, and publishers concerning what

content is published and how it is presented. Those principles reach back to John Milton but flourished during the Enlightenment and the corresponding revolution of thought, a revolution that introduced ideas about rationalism, natural rights, and the “self-righting” process of the market. As those ideas apply to the press, it is perhaps best summed up by Thomas Jefferson, who in addition to being a statesman was himself a writer and a publisher, owning a handful of newspapers and publications. In his own words:

No experiment can be more interesting than we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth...The firmness with which the people have withstood the late abuses of the press, the discernment they have manifested between truth and falsehood, show that they may safely be trusted to hear everything true and false, and to form a correct judgement between them. (Siebert et al 47)

This idea, that people can “be trusted to hear everything true and false,” is so firmly rooted in the American consciousness that it persisted through the centuries, making it into the earliest journalistic code of ethics, the Canons of Journalism, adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1923 (Siebert et al 85). I won’t quote directly from the canons, but implicit in them is the “faith that man is primarily a rational creature, able to discover truth, to separate right from wrong by power of reason” and faith “in the efficacy of the self-righting process” (Siebert et al 85). The self-righting process, which to American journalists, then and arguably now, meant the truth would win out and punish false narratives through the power of choice and the market. Faith in this idea was so strong that it gave rise to the “cult of objectivity,” a concept of reporting that seeks to “eliminate as far as possible all political bias in

the news” (Siebert et al 60). As the cult took hold, “newspaper reporters thought that their job required an attitude of aloofness” and so they became “spectators rather than participants” (Siebert et al 61). This meant avoiding not only partisanship, a worthy goal in and of itself, but evaluation as well, which led to criticism, that in their slavish devotion to objectivity, “a matter of professional pride,” journalists had neglected to both “tell the whole truth” and to provide “a sufficient basis for evaluating the news in terms of social goals” (Siebert et al 61).

Arising post-WWII and into the mid-twentieth century out of this environment, social responsibility theory came into being. Unrestrained free expression was increasingly seen to be dangerous, precisely because it could be used to “inflame hatred, to vilify, to lie,” leading to the belief that if man “uses it to deliberately contaminate the springs of truth...he has no claim to the right” (Siebert et al 98). There was also a recognition that unrestricted libertarianism made the larger, unengaged public easy prey for “demagogues, advertising pitchmen, and others” (Siebert et al 100). These criticisms successfully impacted the coverage of the Civil Rights Movement as it gained more and more traction, but thanks to massive changes in the media’s landscape beginning in the 1990s, the “cult of objectivity” still remains fairly dominant. Those changes mark a return to those early days of American journalism, when editors “unabashedly shaped the news and their editorial comments to partisan purposes” (Baughman). Those editors “sought to convert the doubters, recover the wavering, and hold the committed” (Baughman), and not to be too topical, weren’t above crafting Fake News™. Perhaps more important than what the partisan editors of old did though is why they stopped, which according to various historians and journalism scholars was not, as prominent nineteenth-century critic Willard Bleyer would have hoped, due to “a more responsible, professional attitude among journalists and editors” (Baughman). In short, like most things in the world, it came down to money. “The cost of

publishing a daily paper, especially in the largest cities, began growing to the point that party subsidies no longer covered operating costs,” so newspapers went looking for new revenue sources, and in a move reflective of journalism today, targeted department stores and related retailers who preferred unbiased coverage that appealed to the greatest number of potential customers (Baughman).

What changed in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is that the public had other options; they had “a safe harbor” (Baughman). Such “safe harbors” include radio shock jockeys like Rush Limbaugh or, frankly, Fox News, but by far the most important “harbor” and the one that I’ll touch on again in more detail in a later chapter, is the Internet, with as many webs sites and blogs as there are needles in a haystack. As cheap to produce as the early colonial pamphlets and arguably cheaper, news sources for conservatives, liberals, communists, and fascists are at their fingertips today. This had led some journalists to ask “have we gone full circle? Is it 1850 all over again?” (Baughman). Those that would argue we haven’t point to “the factious newspaper culture of the mid-nineteenth century,” which allowed for outright falsehoods to be printed with little pushback (Baughman). While I agree with them to a point, in that “today’s media culture is in fact divided between the new partisan media of the radio, internet and cable, and those news outlets that still endeavor to report the news seriously,” the idea that “serious news services won’t, for example, provide platforms for those who insist the President was born in Kenya” has been thoroughly disproven by Donald Trump’s candidacy (Baughman). Disregarding the fact that Donald Trump was, and remained until well into his presidential campaign, a notorious Birther (someone who believes former President Barack Obama was born in Kenya), he makes similarly outrageous claims and statements weekly, if not daily, that go on to be debated on CNN panels until the journalists and panelists involved simply move on to the

next claim or statement. That is why the return to the libertarian theory of the press, though a result of economic and technological factors instead of philosophical ones, is as disturbing now as it was in 1850.

After illuminating the theories, both classical and journalistic, that help define cable news as a genre and, more specifically, how CNN exemplifies that genre, it follows that I should then both define “genre” and establish the genre-specific framework I’m applying to the network. Now, when most people hear the word “genre,” they think of a fairly simple label given to a group of similarly themed media, like fantasy books or horror movies. However, genre can be much more complicated and certainly more expansive. To that end, I want to get into the theory behind genre theory and explain how I’ve adapted those tenets into the more complex definition and framework at work here.

To begin with, there are three schools of genre, International ESP Tradition, North American New Rhetoric, and Australian Systemic-Functional School, and myriad scholars within each school who approach genre from their own unique perspective (Swales 1). For this project, I’ll be using the definition and framework devised by one of the foundational scholars of the North American school of thought, Carolyn Miller. For her, genre must go beyond “similarities in form and substance” and a “recurring rhetorical situation,” by achieving “a rational fusion of elements... a coherent pragmatic force.” To that end, she established “a theory and definition of genre that would allow me to understand how these documents were doing their work—or failing to do the work they were intended to do.” For her, this meant focusing on a new idea, the idea of pragmatic force in the text, an idea adapted from “speech-act theory, with its notion of illocutionary force,” which conceives of “genre as a macro-speech-act with analogous generic illocutionary force,” i.e. the pragmatic action (Miller 58).



Addressing the idea of genre as social action, a central tenet of the North American school of thought, she also differentiates between “the consequences of the speech act, the perlocutionary effect” and the social action actually performed by the genre in question. This is itself a callback to the “‘dynamic’ postulated to be at the heart of genre by [earlier] rhetorical critics Campbell and Jamieson,” which is the “unification of form and substance into action-as-meaning” (Miller 58). The idea of “action as meaning” is particularly relevant here because it carries with it connotations of performativity, a theory that originated in literary theory and is further explored in the following subsection, and which greatly informs the genre-specific features of cable news. Cable news, with its roots in traditional journalism, is also a “macro-speech act” precisely because it has pragmatic force and a goal in mind, a goal rooted in the libertarian theory of the press. Miller has more recently synthesized the above ideas into a workable framework that I’ll be using as well.

There are six elements of this framework: context, content, form, motivating exigence, generic action, intrinsic functions, and extrinsic functions. Perhaps the best way to understand these elements and how they function within this framework is through an example. Miller applied this framework to personal blogs in a genre study she conducted in the mid-late 2000s. For reference, these blogs ran the gamut from quasi-diaries to political to, occasionally, glorified fan sites. Below is the breakdown of those sites using Miller’s framework.

- Context: cultural “Kairos”: confession, celebrity, commercialization
- Content: semantic immediacy, self-reference, freedom of selection, “personality”
- Form: links, commentary, frequency, brevity, reverse chronology, time-stamping, present tense
- Motivating exigence: need for cultivation and validation of self

- Generic action: self-disclosure and self-construction
- intrinsic functions: self-clarification, self-validation
- extrinsic functions: relationship development, social control

In action, this framework could be applied to a blog site like *Daily Kos*, a politically left-leaning site that seeks to foster community and discussion and through that inspire political action, though she would and I am, specifically looking at individual entries, which both provide the genre-specific characteristics and prove the framework once applied. For example, in an [entry](#) from the night of the South Carolina 2016 Democratic Primary, the blog post in question provided Kairos, obviously, but also facilitated an environment of confession for Hillary Clinton voters who, up until then, had not really had the space or opportunity to exuberantly celebrate a political victory. We can also see other elements of the framework, like links and frequency in terms of form, validation of self for motivating exigence, self-disclosure for generic action, and relationship development for extrinsic functions. Miller's framework is more understandable in action, but additionally, seeing it applied also helps illustrate the "coherent pragmatic force" she describes as essential to her definition of genre, since this blog, and *Daily Kos* blogs in general, do have pragmatic goals and result in real-world action.

All the blogs she looked at similarly fit within this framework, which is how she established both the fact that personal blogs were their own unique genre and the process by which they performed social actions. Similarly, it is how I intend to illustrate the process by which the unique genre-specific elements of cable news, in the form of CNN's panel discussions, perform their function of normalizing the varied discriminatory and offensive statements of Donald Trump.

Moving on to performativity, the general theory comes from queer theory, with its pioneer being Judith Butler. In terms of how I'm applying the theory, I'm adapting a new media scholar's application of Butler's definition. Rob Cover explains that "to view this [Facebook profile] in a framework of performativity, the establishment and maintenance of a profile is not a conscious self-representation but a series of performative acts that constitute the self and stabilize it over time as the effect of those choices" (60). Cover's work had to do with social media profiles, but its central approach to performativity, such as it being a "tool for the production and maintenance of a coherent identity," constituted through performative acts rather than genuine representation, work quite well when applied to the genre of cable news broadly and CNN specifically. For the network, the coherent identity they're maintaining is one of libertarian-esque objectivity, which in this case is not a descriptor but rather a performative act, mimicking earlier journalistic genres.

Finally, understanding some of the underlying principles of visual rhetoric is essential to any genre-specific analysis of cable news. After all, it is an intensely visual medium and much of the work it does in normalizing racism and the like is accomplished by manipulating these principles. Certainly, the genre's authority and therefore the elements of performativity within it would not exist without its use of culturally specific visual codes, codes that confer more legitimacy to the debates that actually accomplish the aforementioned normalization. These codes, as theorized by visual scholar Stuart Hall are implicit and exist in all visual elements; indeed, Hall's idea comes from color theory, but "certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed...but to be 'naturally' given" (95). Still, he, as well as many other color theorists are quick to point out, that "even apparently 'natural' visual codes are culture

specific” at their core (Hall 95). However, even when the implicit codes of an image are not “apparently natural,” they are no less powerful or affecting, as Susan Sontag points out.

Speaking about consciousness raising, she explains “images that mobilize conscience are almost always linked to a given historical situation,” which we can extrapolate from and say that no image is viewed in a vacuum, and indeed photographs engender stronger reactions when they’re not, a view held by many visual scholars besides Sontag (Sontag 17). In the case of cable news and specifically CNN’s panel discussions, their physical construction creates this mobilization, as examined in later sections.

Outside of encoded images, there are a few other visual principles germane to cable news set construction and how they present themselves to viewers. To understand these principles, I turn to Kress and van Leeuwen, two social semioticians who spend a great deal of time discussing how power is conferred through image, with high angles making “the subject look small and insignificant” and low angles making it seem “imposing and awesome” (140). In regard to horizontal angles, images taken straight on, rather than from an oblique angle, encourage the viewer to align him or herself with the object or objects in question, rather than remain a detached observer (Kress and van Leeuwen 136). Eye contact and distance also come into play, determining whether an image is making an offer to or a demand of the viewer. A visual offer, as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen, occurs when the “represented participant is the object of the viewer’s dispassionate scrutiny” (119). Or, to put it very simply, it is an image that requires no eye contact with the viewer (Kress and van Leeuwen 119). That dispassionate response from the viewer is often, and is in the case of cable news, aided and abetted by the subject’s public distance from them, rather than evoking the more informal and pathetic appeals made by close personal and social distance. This decision to frame the image as an offer, as a presentation of

fact, understandable as that is when it comes to a genre like cable *news*, takes on additional meaning for the same reasons as its use of specific encoded images: they confer legitimacy to everything presented within that frame.

## II. The Genre of Cable News

The heart of the issue is the manner of coverage Donald Trump has received on cable news. Even with the focus on CNN, cable news as a genre requires examination, because it is only by understanding the features of the medium as a whole that we can understand the specific rhetorical mechanisms that make possible CNN's normalization of Trump's myriad socially/morally reprehensible comments and positions.

### i. Origins and Characteristics

Beginning at the birth of cable news is to begin at the birth of CNN itself, as it was the nation's first cable news channel. In 1980, Ted Turner launched the channel as an alternative to the traditional broadcast networks known as the "Big Three," ABC, CBS, and NBC (Spurlock 278). CNN, and later other networks, gained their "market niche primarily because other U.S. networks did not conceive of news as a lucrative business" (Spurlock 278). It is from this profit model that we see the advent of the twenty-four hour news cycle, which journalist Bob Garfield already pinpointed as a component of the normalization of Trump, calling out the genre's penchant for "being slave to the fresh angle." There is undoubtedly a tremendous frenetic energy inherent in cable news which naturally leaves little room for introspection. In the case of Trump himself, who often makes a different outlandish or offensive statement every day, it follows that the natural format of such of a genre would then be stretched to its limits. Scholars who study cable news have commented on this energy and its consequences, which have created a "political economy" that "mandates the necessity of certain types of mediated cultural performances" (Jones, *The 'New' News* 148). Or put another way, "spectacular stories are integral to the profitability of 24-hour news organizations. CNN, MSNBC, and the Fox News network survive

on the timely arrival and speedy, efficient exploitation of large-scale media events” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 148). And whatever else you think of him, Trump is spectacle personified.

The twenty-four hour news cycle was and is determinative in other ways as well, encouraging behavior that fosters polarization. As a result of networks needing “to fill twenty-four hours of airtime and attract and retain niche audiences who



Figure 1 First Kennedy- Nixon Debate

had a broad range,” and growing, “of viewing choices now at their fingertips,” branding and community building strategies emerged (Jones, *Fox News* 180). Adopting strategies usually seen by entertainment networks, cable news networks became increasingly focused on ratings and profitability, leading to the development of a “‘aesthetic-expressive’...postmodern journalistic style” (Jones, *Fox News* 180).

Beyond the structure of the twenty-four hour news cycle, there are several other distinctive features of cable news, features that both provide the mechanisms of normalization and make them successful. It shares these features with traditional journalism, which is, to be clear, an entirely different, though similar, genre. Perhaps the most important thing to remember when breaking down its conventions then, is that cable news is a facsimile, “poaching the

authority and legitimacy (both culturally and politically) formerly established by broadcast news operations” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 147). It’s successful because it uses “the familiar generic



Figure 2 Buckley (left) and Vidal Face Off

banner of 'news,' ...employing standardized news presentational conventions and styles,” suggesting a specific “relationship to current events and public life” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 147). Much of this authority is conferred through the use of visual cues, like the ones pictured in Figures 1 and 2, which mobilize our consciousness, to paraphrase Sontag, because they are encoded with cultural and historical significance and thus work their will upon us, in this case quite successfully. This idea is rooted in color theory, but Hall’s work is applicable here and the idea of quasi-natural visual codes is particularly powerful, which is why CNN’s staging, especially their panel discussions, can invoke the idea of classical, balanced debate so subtly and effectively.

Textually, these traditional journalistic conventions includes such aspects as “authoritative language, the access it grants to political players, and its ability to craft political ‘reality’ and structure audience receptivity to its messages” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 147), and is, on the whole, both a holdover from the days of broadcast news and a conscious attempt to foster legitimacy. For cable titan Fox News, it is certainly an intentional “and necessary ‘cover’ for the network, helping to thwart charges of propaganda or partisanship and contributing “to its



believability as a source for the establishment of ‘truth’” (Jones, *Fox News* 179). For CNN though, the use of these conventions, as well as the standards of “objectivity, fairness, accuracy, verification and editorial judgement,” including “those that should be absent from the practice, such as sensationalism, partisanship, bias, speculation and assertion,” are more sincere and thus more complicated (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 147).

## ii. Defining CNN

Returning to CNN itself, it is essential that we understand where the network fits on the political spectrum of the three main cable news outlets, MSNBC, Fox, and, obviously, CNN. CNN both claims and is perceived as being the least partisan of all the cable networks. Even as Fox and MSNBC increasingly embraced that partisanship, CNN “has attempted to maintain an image of old-line journalistic professionalism.” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 150). In the words of CNN’s president Ken Jautz, “Our business model is based on quality journalism and nonpartisan programming” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 150). Outside of the president himself, CNN also “lays claim to a nonpartisan journalistic ideology for its content,” which is largely tied to and “aided by the fact that CNN does plenty of reporting on news outside the political sphere,” where they have largely avoided any “questions of slant or spin” (Bode 14).

Of course, despite this “refusal to embrace a partisan or ideological identity,” the network has found other ways to distinguish itself. Recently, it has utilized new media and technology, which is interesting inasmuch as such a presentation style works to “make its expertise and competence” more material to the viewer. Given the aforementioned non-partisan image they have cultivated, it’s not difficult to see a link between the two (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 151). The decision to avoid “the stark, open partisanship of both Fox News and MSNBC” has reportedly been profitable for CNN, since according to reports from the American Journalism

Review, “advertisers like CNN’s reputation, and are willing to pay handsomely to be associated with it” (Bode 14). Still, despite the reported revenue, since “fervent conservatives opt for Fox News and fervent liberals opt for MSNBC” (Bode 14), CNN has suffered in terms of audience thanks to these choices, with viewers on both sides of the aisle reporting partisan bias in their coverage. It must also be noted that the network is “getting creamed in the ratings, with a decline in viewers of 40 per cent between 2009 and 2010, and a 20-year low in prime-time viewership in 2012” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 150). CNN’s past ratings woes and their election-season upward trend are especially relevant in light of Trump’s documented effect on television ratings (they’re yuuge!), which adds another element to the coverage of him that must be acknowledged, even if it is not the focus here.

### iii. Understanding Fox News, Understanding Cable

It is impossible to truly analyze or understand the genre of cable news or CNN as an individual network without understanding the most successful cable news channel on the air, Fox News, both because success begets success, and “within a decade. Fox was crushing its cable news competitors in ratings and profitability” (Jones, *Fox News* 179), but also for the network’s effect on the media landscape. Born out of a conservative culture that resented the so-called liberal media, Fox strived to show the other side of issues previously ignored, and they did so “by presenting politically biased,” in this case “overtly ideologically conservative,” news and opinions (Jones, *Fox News* 179). The network uses slogans such as “‘Fair and Balanced’ and ‘We Report, You Decide,’” but they are unmistakably partisan (Jones, *Fox News* 179). The key point here is really that they were the first to reject “the traditional rules of journalism” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 150), and that has consequences not just for themselves but for other networks, who were and are inexorably pulled further right and, often, into the land of conspiracy theory.

The Overton Window, a theory of social and political change, is perhaps the best way to describe it here, since Fox has successfully redefined the middle, where CNN professes to reside, by pulling everything to the right.

How have they accomplished this? On Fox, the traditional journalism is subsumed by the “techniques of translating public life into compelling aesthetic performances as threats to the viewers' core beliefs and values,” even if those threats are largely if not wholly imagined (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 152). This rhetorical choice, rooted in performativity theory, which will be discussed in depth later, allows such speech acts to create corresponding “realities through their utterance” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 152). So, what Fox News has done, by “divorcing traditional standards of journalism from its programming and embracing political entertainment television instead, is create opportunities for an array of fantastical 'realities' to exist simply by their utterance and repeated iterations across all programming” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 152). For example:

Midday News host Megan Kelly can conjure the specter of racial fear and hatred by accusing the New Black Panther Party in Philadelphia of white voter intimidation in the 2010 midterm elections. Late-afternoon talk show host Glenn Beck can force the resignation of Obama appointee Van Jones by branding him an 'unrepentant Communist revolutionary'. And prime-time talk show host Sean Hannity can continually stoke Obama 'Birther' rumors - that is, contending that the president is not a legal citizen of the United States because he was supposedly born abroad.” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 153)

Where this impacts CNN, is the fact that the “‘truth’ in each of these instances,” is “something that in previous eras would depend largely on confirmation and verification by other news agencies discovering and reporting the same thing” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 153). Yet now,

objective truth can be less important than the “ideologically dependent ‘reality’ created through such performative moments within a single network” (Jones, *The ‘New’ News* 153). So, in the modern era, when CNN tries to operate by libertarian journalistic standards, giving equal weight to both sides and avoiding bias, they are often validating “ideologically dependent realities” introduced and normalized by Fox. Given this already embedded pattern, it is easy to see how a candidate like Trump could take advantage of such a genre.

However, since I’m writing this in 2016 and not 2004, I want to spend a bit of time acknowledging the other “ideologically dependent realities” that have been brought to bear on CNN. In the previous chapter on methods I alluded to the “safe havens” that twenty-first century viewers have, and it is within those “safe havens,” specifically *Breitbart*, *Drudge*, *The Daily Caller*, *Gateway Pundit*, and *The Alex Jones Show*, that “ideologically dependent realities” beyond even those at Fox News are created and proliferated. For some context, *Breitbart*, whose chief editor advises the president, has a “Black Crime” counter in its sidebar, and Alex Jones, who has interviewed the current President, is a Sandy Hook truther. That is, he believes that the horrific 2012 school shooting did not occur and was instead staged with child actors. These are the realities that have been injected into mainstream media, like CNN, through Trump’s dangerous rhetoric. What makes his dangerous rhetoric potentially poisonous to the public consciousness is the fact that while the democratizing power of the internet has ushered in a neo-libertarian era of the press, our culture by and large still operates according to the social responsibility theory in terms of devotion to the “cult of objectivity.” Indeed, many print titans, like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, still remain committed to social responsibility theory in spite of the splintering of news sources that’s occurred exponentially since the early 2000s. Even more confusing is the fact that cable news—and here CNN actually is the chief

offender—still wants to have its cake and eat it too, so to speak. They insist on debating even the most offensive stances, like the oft-mentioned KKK incident, but the moderators of those panels, the journalists, refrain from offering strong opinions, if they offer any at all. Instead, it is up to opposing panels of partisans, with some even coming from those above invective-filled “news sites” or at least online publications that are remarkably similar, to fight it out. These “debates” ultimately only serves to cloud the entire public environment by lending a veneer of objective legitimacy to coverage that is decidedly partisan.

#### iv. Repetition Makes Reality: Performativity on Cable News

After watching Jeffery Lord “debate” the latest Trump controversy, the argument that cable news is a performance is not hard to believe. However, to “suggest that news,” as it is traditionally defined, is also a performance is surprising, if “saying nothing new” (Jones, *Fox News* 181). “Events, issues, and social tensions are performed daily in television news, brought to life through narratives, acted out through visuals, embroidered with emotions,” and have been since before cable news ever hit the scene (Jones, *Fox News* 181). Beyond that though, TV news also has its own “standard set of performance codes or tropes, each used to establish first and foremost the legitimacy and authority of those imparting such ‘truths,’ and each central to its stated purpose of representing ‘reality’ (Jones, *Fox News* 181). When it comes to cable news specifically, though, we see ideology take precedent and twist these codes and tropes.

Ideology, deconstructed in the previous section on methods, is more than just its rhetorical definition. While it remains a “network of interpretation,” it cannot be divorced in this context from the generic attributes of CNN, which as a successful text of sorts, one that is “well conceptualized and well-constructed,” therefore “*performs* the genre” (Swales 14). The overarching point here is that the idea of CNN as a text, though not a fiction as I do think that

goes too far, allows one to better see the narrative attributes of any single ideology, because ideologies do “need dramaturgical devices to be successful,” and “a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week news channel” offers “a steady flow of dramaturgical renderings, including conflict, personification, identification, symbolism, suspense, catharsis...” (Jones, *Fox News* 182).

Recognizing that much of what passes for “debate” on CNN as it pertains to Trump during the election is, in fact, a cathartic performance of stylized political conflict rather than a revealing exploration of race or misogyny, which, ethically and morally, should be the goal, is key in my opinion.

Returning to Fox News in particular, though, where the news anchors essentially “pick sides,” operating ideologically actually allows them to create an us vs. them rhetoric that “allows for conflict, victimization, and scapegoating” (Jones, *Fox News* 182). Given Trump’s penchant for scapegoating, seen most clearly in his comments on immigration, election coverage in 2016 allowed for a mutually reinforcing cycle to occur in this regard.

So clearly it seems news, both broadcast and cable, is a performance. Accepting that, what then does it have to do specifically with the normalization of Donald Trump’s racist rhetoric? How does it achieve that normalization? As I said early on, normalization in this context occurs through the debate of previously agreed upon racial, ethical, and arguably moral, issues. To return to a quote from Jamelle Bouie, which I think encapsulates the process of normalization occurring here best, “Ideas and symbols that were once considered beyond the pale become less so. They leave the realm of taboo and enter the world of partisan combat, where ethics and meaning are a function of tribal identity” (*Slate*).

But how, specifically, does the process of normalization occur during these CNN debates? How is the process successful? To answer that, I turn to the idea of performativity, which is “a

recognition that language often produces, not just reflects upon, that which it names” (Jones, *Fox News* 183). In traditional journalism, “constative speech acts or utterances,” which “report, find, and discover” and are “aimed at the production of true and false statements” dominate (Jones, *Fox News* 183). However, as we have seen, cable news is not traditional journalism, and “performativity highlights how words can be ‘actions in themselves,’” or “bring into being that which is spoken” (Jones, *Fox News* 184). The success of performativity though, as explained by J.L. Austin, notes that context is key, which is why the “genre of news is vitally important in making such statements real, believable, accessible, knowable, provable, and repeatable” (Jones, *Fox News* 184). Put bluntly, “without news, such statements are little more than opinions, but “within news, they become ‘facts’” (Jones, *Fox News* 184).

All this is to say that it is cable news’ genre-typical performativity that makes the normalization of Donald Trump possible. In the specific case of CNN, the repeated instances of “both sides-ism,” which is perhaps the most modern iteration of objectivity, being rooted in cynicism and hyper-critical reporting, that occur when discussing racist statements made by Donald Trump are what allows the genre of news and the accompanying principles and authority that they have to be poached, to be turned into a mechanism that transforms taboos into “real, believable, accessible, knowable, provable, and repeatable” news to be debated (Jones, *Fox News* 184).

Why is this type of broadcast so dangerous, aside from the obvious validation of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism, which is always dangerous in any circumstance? Given the fact that “almost 60% of Americans receive some of their news and information from television” and “most of this country’s residents are exposed to news and information that includes audio and/or video sound bites” what they are actually being exposed to and how dangerous or toxic it is

should be of some concern to us all (Spurlock 279). So when twenty-four hour television news channels, or today, even YouTube and satellite radio, constantly inundate viewers, as they are wont to do, with debates on whether Donald Trump was being racist when he questioned a Federal judge's qualifications because he was Mexican-American, there are consequences. Scholar Jefferson Spurlock argues that that repetition played an enormous role in the failure of the campaigns of Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock after their controversial remarks on rape were broadcast and went viral. They apologized, attempting to "walk it back," to use the political parlance, but that did little "thanks in part to the media's overexposure" (Spurlock 279). If one comment can do that to one political campaign, what can over a year's worth of equivocating debate over and about racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, etc. comments do?

Now, having looked at the genre and network more broadly, I want to examine CNN's treatment of some individual incidents involving Donald Trump in more depth, using the framework established in the previous section on methods, in order to illustrate precisely how it is doing the work described above.

### III. Illustrative Incidents

#### i. David Duke, The KKK, and Van Jones v. Jeffery Lord

When Donald Trump refused to immediately and fully disavow Klansman David Duke, it set off a political firestorm and became a topic of debate across cable news. The KKK is a terrorist organization, powered by white nationalism and responsible for scores of horrifically violent incidents across the decades. As such, *any* equivocation on the subject or any defense of that equivocation is itself indefensible. Below is the key portion of the transcript, before it



descended into simple pugnacity, courtesy of *Media Matters for America*, from a discussion between former Obama aide Van Jones and Trump supporter Jeffery Lord on CNN.

JONES: Hold on a sec -- Innocent black kids. Listen, hold on a second. We have a big problem at this point now. Because I agree with you about a lot. I think we have taken him not seriously, we have not respected his voters, but there is a dark underside here and S.E. is right. He is whipping up and tapping into and pushing buttons that are very, very frightening to me and frightening to a lot of people. Number one, when he is playing funny with the Klan, that is not cool.

LORD: He didn't play funny with the Klan.

JONES: Hold on a second. I know this man when he gets passionate about terrorism. I know how he talks about terrorism. The Klan is a terrorist organization that has killed --

LORD: A leftist terrorist organization.

JONES: You can put whatever label you want, that's your game to play.

LORD: No, it's important to history.

JONES: We're not going to play that game.

LORD: We're going to understand history.

JONES: No, you need to take a serious look at the fact that this man has been playing fast and loose and footsie -- when you talk about terrorism, he gets passionate. He says no, this is wrong. But when you talk about the Klan, oh, I don't know, I don't know. That's wrong. And then you came on the air and you said, well this is just like when Reverend Wright was speaking. Reverend Wright never lynched anybody, Reverend Wright never killed anybody.

LORD: Reverend Wright is an anti-Semite.



Figure 3 Trump Apologist Schooled on White Nationalism

JONES: Reverend Wright never put anybody on a post. And you guys play these word games and it's wrong to do in America.

There are a couple of rhetorical devices I want to point out here, one of which is pretty clearly used in bad faith and another which is conspicuously missing. The first is, funnily enough, the first of the four questions, conjecture. That is, does it happen? In this case Jeffery Lord, in calling the Ku Klux Klan a “leftist terrorist organization” establishes conjecture for his argument, but he accomplishes this by completely disregarding the cultural shifts of the last fifty years. I mean that, while the KKK was formed and grew to prominence during a period in history when segregationists in the South identified as Democrats, he neglects to note the realignment of the two parties after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and further muddies the water by specifically calling it leftist, which is an obvious stand-in for “Democrat,” and thus ascribing a political ideology to the racist organization erroneously. However, this idea that the Democrats are responsible for the KKK as it exists post-1964, and particularly in the twenty-first century when overwhelming majorities of minorities vote for Democrats, is a commonplace in conservative circles where the phrase “The Party of Lincoln” is routinely trotted out to paper over the modern party’s views and record on issues of race.

Visually, the most striking thing about this “debate” is the embedded codes, which along with Lord’s use of specific rhetorical devices and arguably even the fact that the host didn’t dismiss Lord’s defense of the indefensible out of hand, thus facilitating the “debate,” ascribe a certain amount of legitimacy to Lord’s argument about the KKK. Compare the screengrab to the image in Figure 2 and the similarities are striking, excepting the fact that Lord is located on the right side of the frame rather than the left. That image, taken from one of the infamous Buckley/Vidal debates, which whatever you think of their content, are iconic in large part

because they were seen as a successful defense of conservatism by Buckley, is strikingly similar. Lord is no William Buckley, but nevertheless he absorbs some of his authority through his own visual representation.

## ii. Bad Hombres

In the third and final presidential debate, Donald Trump referred to illegal immigrants as “bad hombres.” This comment, taken within the context of his infamous “Mexicans are rapists and murders” speech in July of 2015, is clearly trying to unfairly stereotype Latino Americans as morally deficient. That is obviously rooted in both racism and xenophobia, two philosophies that are themselves morally repugnant and therefore morally indefensible. What follows is a transcript, courtesy of *Media Matters for America*, of the most relevant portion of the post-debate panel discussion, primarily between Patti Solis Doyle, former campaign aide to both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and Trump supporter Jeffery Lord, that followed.

PATTI SOLIS DOYLE: Kayleigh, my father emigrated here from Mexico illegally twice. Was deported twice. Came back the third time legally. To me, I was born here. I'm an American citizen. To me, that was very offensive. You heard me when we were watching it in the green room. I was aghast at it. That was just offensive. It's offensive to Hispanics. It's offensive to Mexicans.



Figure 4 Trump Surrogates Defend "Bad Hombres" Remark

JEFFREY LORD: To say what?

DOYLE: Bad hombre.

LORD: Oh, come on Patti. Patti, you're an American. I'm an American. I've heard that phrase all my life. That has nothing to do with Donald Trump.

DOYLE: Where do you hear that phrase? Where do you hear it?

LORD: American television Westerns in the 1950s. "He's a bad hombre."

DOYLE: 1950s.

ANDERSON COOPER (HOST): By the way, I'm not sure a 1950s American television is the best benchmark for what is good language and not offensive.

LORD: I have never heard that compared to say the n-word. Right? Right? This is, this is political correctness to a max.

NIA-MALIKA HENDERSON: Why didn't he just say bad dudes?

LORD: Because there are dudes that would be offended if you say dudes.

HENDERSON: Why did he specifically use Spanish in that instance?

LORD: What's wrong with it? There's nothing wrong with it.

HENDERSON: Why do you think he did it, then? I mean?

LORD: Because it's colloquial, it's in the American language.

HENDERSON: No one says that, no one says that Jeffrey.

LORD: You don't know enough people.

Here again there is deliberate disregard for the common topic of conjecture, though not in the same way as in the previous example, which is most obvious in Jeffery Lord's quick analogy to the n-word. Conjecture is also concerned with the extent to which something exists, so while on the face of it, Lord can make that analogy, the fact is that word has powerful connotations within and outside the African-American community because of its deep history in American culture, predating the country itself. So given the colonial history of Mexico, any such

corresponding history is necessarily less powerful, along with any connection between the two. Lord avoids addressing the question and/or issue put to him by attempting to derail the conversation into one about the relationship between the two phrases, but in my view, he also fails the first test, with that being the question of conjecture. He is arguing that the use of the aforementioned phrase in 1950s western proves its innocuousness, but this disregards the history of those films themselves, which have been criticized for their racism by modern viewers. In that case, his argument is based on a false premise.

Visually, the staging of this discussion is much closer to the staging of a classical debate, or even a presidential one, as pictured in Figure 1. With moderator Anderson Cooper in the middle and Lord and Doyle on opposing sides, he on the right and she on the left, the audience is given the clear impression that what they have to say is equal, even equally valid, just as it would be in a presidential debate. Beyond borrowing authority from embedded historical codes, equal weight is also established in the layout of the image, which situates both speakers on the same plane and obliquely along the horizontal axis. Neither is foregrounded either, which would also shift the balance of power in the image.

### iii. A “Sheriff’s Star

In the summer of 2016, Donald Trump tweeted a graphic which included Hillary Clinton, the Star of David, and images of money. It originated on an anti-Semitic Internet forum and as such was the topic of controversy and debate on many networks for a brief period of time. Anti-Semitism has existed for thousands of years and was disgusting in all of them, but to try to imply a connection between monetary greed and the Jewish people, an argument made by Adolf Hitler’s propagandists, is especially so in the post-Holocaust era. It is an argument that played a

role in the murder of six million people and as such should not be defended or allowed to be explained away as a mere misunderstanding. What follows is a transcript of a Trump campaign surrogate attempting to defend his decision to share the graphic, courtesy of *Media Matters for America*.

CHRIS CUOMO (HOST): The star comment gave you the sour face when Margaret [Hoover] said it. Why?

KAYLEIGH MCENANY: Because I think it was a contrived controversy. Look, you look at police departments who use this same star. The Chicago Police Department, for instance, has the same star without the points. You look at the *Frozen* ad that you showed just a few moments ago, has the same star. This is a contrived --

CUOMO: Do you know where the graphic came of Hillary Clinton?

MCENANY: Of Hillary Clinton?

CUOMO: Yeah.



Figure 5 "Contrived Controversy" and the Star of David

MCENANY: I know where it came from.

CUOMO: That graphic was made for a very specific purpose on a message board by a specific type of voice. We know that, right?

MCENANY: We don't know that that's where his --

MARGARET HOOVER: Anti-Semitic corner of the internet where they originate.

MCENANY: We don't know that that's where his social media director got it. Images percolate around the internet where they originate.

CUOMO: It just came up on the same exact day?

MCENANY: No, it was on Twitter. This was a widely-spread image. And the point is, we can talk about all these contrived controversies, but the point is do people think Donald Trump is anti-Semitic or not? You are foolish if you think that, because he has a Jewish daughter, he has Jewish grandkids.

CUOMO: Here would be my point of suggestion. You're making people think that by defending something that you shouldn't have defended. You should have apologized and said, "I would have never put out an image that was supposed to be offensive to Jews" because of all the reasons that you just offered up. "So this was a mistake and let's move on." But he didn't do that.

MCENANY: But he addressed it and that is what people like about Donald Trump. When there's a controversy, he addresses it, unlike Hillary Clinton, who spent the day deriding Donald Trump, never never mentioning why she was contradicted by the FBI director, sitting FBI director. She doesn't address it. Donald Trump takes controversy head on and addresses it and people like that. That's what a real person does

This discussion is a bit different from the other examples provided here, both because it is not a panel discussion and because while the previous examples used culturally coded images implicitly, here those codes go from subtext to text. As evidenced by her use of *Frozen* and municipal police departments, McEnany is simply denying the existence of the anti-Semitic codes associated with a six-pointed star, particularly when paired with images of money. In this way, she, like Lord in the previous example, fails to answer the question of conjecture, because the premise of her argument, that a six-pointed star is chiefly evocative of Disney merchandise and sheriffs and not Nazi Germany, is false and so is based on a notion that in point of fact doesn't exist. She also offers up a subtle commonplace in the latter part of the transcript, adamant in the idea that because his daughter converted to Judaism, he couldn't possibly be anti-Semitic. The idea of being innocent by association of prejudice, that well-worn commonplace "I have \_\_\_\_ friends," is pretty clearly at work here and is an example of a *non sequitur*.

Visually, this image poaches much of his authority from classic broadcasters, rather than debate. Besides just differentiating it from the other examples here, it's interesting in that it allows Cuomo, the interviewer, to evoke, through posture, horizontal and vertical angles, and distance from McEnany who is located across from him (in the far left, closest to the "Veepstakes" screen), to appear, at least in some small part, commensurate with someone like Walter Cronkite. The particular kind of consciousness raised by such a figure is unique, and it benefits the stature of the interviewee as well as Cuomo. I also want to draw attention to the chyron, which is the descriptive banner across the bottom of the screen and, as Jones explains, is also one of the features by which cable news acquires its borrowed legitimacy. By choosing to call it simply a six-pointed star, rather than including any references to anti-Semitism, CNN legitimizes the debate over its meaning by prioritizing the appearance of objectivity over its responsibility (a responsibility they actually met in the body of the segment) to provide the whole truth. Outside of its connection to the performativity that informs so much of the interactions on CNN, the chyron is also important because for many people the chyron is all they see (Weigel).

#### iv. "Grab Them by the P\*ssy"

In October of 2016 the now infamous *Access Hollywood* tape leaked. It captured then-candidate Donald Trump bragging about what, legally, most considered sexual assault. Obviously, sexual assault is a crime, but it is also a violation of one's body on an intimate level that is hard to imagine for those who have not experienced it. Trying to defend that violation, especially by using other women as shields cannot and should not be tolerated in a civilized society. The resulting firestorm featured multiple harassment lawsuits, calls for an apology, and even a few calls for him to drop out of the race. There are multiple segments that could've been



included here, but what follows is a transcript from what I consider to be a fairly representative argument between two panelists, courtesy of *Media Matters for America*.

JACK KINGSTON: And you know what, I'm a father of two daughters and I would not do that. I know Mike Pence would not do that. But I also know in that Hollywood culture when he was doing a lot of these flippant to me, and I assume with you, offensive kind of comments and interviews, I think that was part of the shtick if you will.

ANDERSON COOPER (HOST): See, I've done Howard Stern only twice when he's done it far more than I have. But you don't have to answer



Figure 6 Not "Offensive Language," but a Sexual Crime

a question. Howard Stern is one of the greatest interviewers there is. And he'll ask provocative questions but you have the power of saying "I'm not going down that road." So, I mean I'm just wondering when this change in Donald Trump occurred.

JOHNATHAN TASINI: And just this little point so we get clear about terminology. You keep, and I say some Republicans, keep using the word "offensive language." Saying I'm going to grab your pussy is sexual assault. That is not just offensive language. And so, I think we have to get the term -- I'm sorry but when somebody contemplates, you know, that and I said before, I believe he committed these acts. 11 women have come forward. I believe that is just the beginning. I believe he did commit those crimes. But saying -- I don't know why you don't see this. It is not just offensive language. He is talking about a sexual crime.

What is very clear in this transcript is the fact that Kingston and Tasini are speaking at cross-purposes. That's important because, while I would argue that Kingston fails to answer the question of conjecture by denying the existence of any sexual assault in the *Access Hollywood* tape, I don't know that that's obvious to an unbiased viewer. However, one rhetorical device

that is obviously at work here is the commonplace. The commonplace “I’m a father of two daughters” or some variation thereof often shows up in discussions surrounding violence, sexual or otherwise, of women. It carries with it certain patriarchal and paternalistic connotations and much like the aforementioned “I have \_\_\_ friends,” is intended to shield the speaker from criticism on those issues, which it does by serving as a red herring, itself a logical fallacy. In the context of the argument it is also a *non sequitur*.

The set construction for this discussion is quite striking, arguably providing the strongest correlation between two images here: Figure 1 and Figure 6. Invoking the image of the Nixon/Kennedy debate and its accompanying cultural codes, Anderson Cooper’s panel provides equal weight to both Kingston and Tasini’s arguments, with Cooper standing in the middle, Kingston located directly to Cooper’s right, and Tasini on the far left. This equalization is only further highlighted by the fact that both speakers are located at an oblique angle and never make eye contact with the audience once engaged, thus encouraging the viewer to regard them both, and consequently their respective arguments, dispassionately.

v. Applying the Framework.

Having examined these individual instances of normalization, we can plug in their common characteristics to Miller’s framework and, together with previously identified broader features, identify the coherent generic strategy at work here.

- Context/ “Kairos”: hyper-partisanship, electoral politics, controversy, libertarian resurgence in the American media
- Content: culturally sensitive topics, discriminatory premises

- Form: commonplaces, failure to address common topic of conjecture, panel discussions, visual callbacks to classical debate
- Motivating exigence: meeting culturally expected standards of objectivity
- Generic action: validating both sides of an issue by providing equal rhetorical and visual weight, as well as time
- Intrinsic functions: professional/personal commitment to objectivity
- Extrinsic functions: preventing unproductive discussions (arguments)

Taken together, the elements of this framework, whether it's commonplaces and sexism or questions of degree and racism, all work in concert to create the impression of a balanced debate about topics which cannot, or rather should not, be debated. These elements lend legitimacy to the debates, giving them more power over the public consciousness than they would otherwise have. That is, the generic framework is why the normalization of Donald Trump has been successful. However, to paraphrase Jamelle Bouie, whose thoughts on this topic I keep returning to, the very fact that these debates occurred at all, that association with the KKK, sexual assault, or blatantly xenophobic scapegoating was allowed to become a partisan battleground, is why that normalization has occurred at all. Having established both what work CNN is doing and how, I want to move on and provide some necessary context and counter arguments.

## V. The Clinton Rules

The central premise of this thesis is that the normalization of Trump's racist, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic statements and policies is a genre-specific failure. Yet, I would be remiss if I just dismissed out of hand the possibility that it was a unique confluence of events, an election featuring two candidates who both brought to bear specific pressures and incentives on members of the press. Donald Trump, of course, was a ratings boon, but Hillary Clinton, just as importantly, brought with her the so-called "Clinton Rules," as well as a certain level of gender bias. Before examining those rules in action, let me first explain what exactly they are.

### i. The Rules Themselves

Different journalists describe them a bit differently, but long-time Clinton reporter Jonathan Allen provides a pretty concise list. He views them as "an essential frame for thinking about the long-toxic relationship between the Clintons and the media," as well as "why the coverage of Hillary Clinton differs from coverage of other candidates for the presidency." In his view, the heart of matter is "reporters' and editors' desire to score the ultimate prize in contemporary journalism: the scoop that brings down Hillary Clinton and her family's political empire."

Allen's first rule is, "Everything, no matter how ludicrous-sounding, is worthy of a full investigation by federal agencies, Congress, the 'vast right-wing conspiracy,' and mainstream media outlets." Given the breathless, often context-less coverage of Clinton's private e-mail server, it's hard to deny that this rule doesn't influence coverage. Officially of course, she was cleared of any wrongdoing, but the "act of choosing, time and again, to go after the same person

has the effect of tainting that person, even when an investigation or reporting turns up nothing nefarious” (Allen).

Additionally, the media’s attitude here disregards the source of those scandals. They “could come from the other party, within a politician's party,” as Allen suggests, though admittedly, some are the result of good, honest investigative reporting. Still, the comparative rarity of the latter result and the overall tone and tenor of all scandal-related coverage is, in all likelihood, why even the two most outlandish, conspiracy laden allegations against Hillary Clinton have persisted: “That she had something to do with the suicide of Clinton White House aide Vince Foster, and that she bears responsibility for the terrorist attack that killed US Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens” (Allen). Of course, there are *many* others, like Travelgate, Filegate, and Whitewater, to name a few, each ranging in legitimacy and lifespan.

Consequently, the Clintons have “a bunker mentality when it comes to transparency,” fostering “paranoia [that] leads them to be secretive” (Allen). This secrecy then fosters suspicion of wrongdoing in the press, as well as among their Republican opposition, though that goes without saying. Finally, closing off this vicious cycle is the ensuing investigation, which, naturally, only heightens the existing secrecy and paranoia. That’s how the cycle has self-perpetuated itself for the past twenty-five years, creating a forced, false choice between, as Allen puts it, “the power couple that always seems to be hiding something” and the overreaching, underachieving partisan “Washington investigation complex.”

In terms of how this first rule plays into the genre of cable news, the insatiable hunger among members of the press “for that one great scoop that will give them the biggest political scalp of them all” creates a tunnel vision that either obscures the so-called “cult of objectivity” or, paradoxically, heightens it, obscuring the extreme nature of the other side (Allen). This is

almost exactly what happened late last summer, when innuendo about the Clinton Global Initiative overpowered legitimately bombshell allegations about the Trump Foundation, which I explain in detail in the next subsection.

Allen's second rule has a bit less to do with concrete consequences like congressional investigations, but it's much more pernicious in its impact on the public consciousness. The rule is as follows: "Every allegation, no matter how ludicrous, is believable until it can be proven completely and utterly false. And even then, it keeps a life of its own in the conservative media world."

For instance, there was the "Benghazi flu," which alleged that Clinton cancelled her planned Senate testimony on Benghazi not because she had actually suffered a concussion, but rather to hide her obvious culpability. Interestingly, the "Benghazi flu" has become a commonplace among the far-right community and is just as contradictory as many others. For some, like Karl Rove, it has evolved, positing the idea that Hillary Clinton suffers from brain damage. How does one "suffer brain damage from a fake fall" Allen (and I) ask? If you believe the answer is "you can't," then you've failed to fully grasp the strange life of an allegation against Hillary Clinton. The unavoidable fact is that conservative media is an "echo chamber, which bounces innuendo from Rush Limbaugh to Fox News and back again," and now that chamber extends to the President himself, thus ensuring "that the most damning story lines — true or not — stay alive" (Allen).

As I discussed in a previous chapter, Fox News has successfully shifted the tone and tenor of media coverage on a variety of issues, but conservative media reaches far beyond Fox, and the freedom it has "to make wild allegations often acts as a bulldozer forcing reporters to check into the charges and, in doing so, repeat them" (Allen), or to bring this back to my analysis

of performativity in cable news, its ability to create “ideologically dependent realities.” This is how the taboo, as with Trump, and the outlandish, as with Clinton, becomes part of what Allen calls Americans’ “collective consciousness.” Or to borrow a cliché, a lie gets around the world before the truth gets out of bed.

Allen’s third rule is similar to the second and more innocuous that an outright accusation: most journalists assume that “Clinton is acting in bad faith until there’s hard evidence otherwise.” It’s not without precedent, on either side, particularly given the pattern “of some-smoke-no-fire investigations” launched against them, but the result is an incredibly dysfunctional, even toxic, relationship wherein “the Clintons believe the press acts in bad faith, and the press believes the Clintons’ attitudes toward the press are evidence that the Clintons are hiding something” (Allen).

The real impact of this rule comes from the fact that “the media is an amplifier for the public,” and thus encourages the viewing public to apply the same lens to her actions (Allen). The result of that encouragement was reflected in the polls, where most Americans say she’s not honest and trustworthy (Allen). In practice, this means that Clinton’s actions are treated as “uniquely sinister,” as was the case with her paid speeches (Allen). Presented as an obvious and aberrant sign of corruption by CNN and countless other media outlets, the public could be forgiven for not knowing that Jeb Bush gave paid speeches as well. Comparatively though, there was almost no coverage and certainly no condemnation of Bush.

This “imbalance in assumptions,” as Allen calls it, greatly distorts the public perception of Hillary Clinton, and like the previous rules, creates a self-perpetuating cycle, with Clinton assuming the press is biased against her, treating them poorly as a result, only to lead new and more reporters to assume she’s hiding something. Furthermore, the news cycle here is self-perpetuating as well, with every new poll showing her to be unlikable and/or untrustworthy

leading to stories asking why, which inevitably leads to repetition of previous “bad-faith” Clinton stories.

Allen’s fourth rule is a bit different, as it has more to do with the volume of coverage rather than the tone of it. According to the Clinton rules, “everything is newsworthy because the Clintons are the equivalent of America’s royal family.”

For instance, the 2015 viral video of Clinton at the Mexican chain restaurant Chipotle was the subject of much mockery from late-night comedians and helped establish a certain narrative of her campaign early on, but it only existed because reporters “made a mad dash to catch up as her campaign van rolled by” in Iowa (Allen). In addition to instances like this, nominally private moments become “part of a public narrative” (Allen), including Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky, Chelsea Clinton’s wedding, and the birth of her granddaughter, which in totality distort the coverage she actually gets. Or as Allen succinctly put it, it makes Clinton appear “hungrier for press than even the average politician, despite the fact that even when Clinton wants to avoid the spotlight, she can’t.

Allen’s fifth rule mixes in a bit of gender bias, and like rules one, two, and three, concerns the tone of her coverage. Simply put, “everything she does is fake and calculated for maximum political benefit.” For her detractors, every move, up to and including the birth of her granddaughter, is “a grandly conceived and executed political calculation” (Allen). For instance, just look at this quote from a journalist at the *Washington Free Beacon*, which I’ve included for how starkly it illustrates this fifth rule: “Clinton’s flaunting of her grandchild is one of the most transparently cynical and sentimental acts of a major American politician that I can recall. We have had presidents who have been parents, and we have had presidents who have been grandparents. But a campaign based on grandparental solidarity? (Allen). Allen asks, and so do



I, if Hillary Clinton occasionally uses positive personal experiences for political purposes. Yes, she does, but as Allen also points out, that “doesn't make her different from other candidates for the presidency — it makes her just like them.” Just like New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, or former Governor Jeb Bush, or Mitt Romney, or even Donald Trump himself, she uses her family to send calculated messages to the public, which is why it's so ridiculous and hypocritical to assign some sinister motivation to the move when she performs it, particularly when Donald Trump's familial ties are used to soften and normalize his image in the face of actual instances of anti-Semitism or sexism.

Of course, I'd also be remiss if I didn't mention the response to her now infamous tear from her 2008 presidential campaign after her surprising loss in the Iowa caucuses. In this case, it was *The New York Times's* Maureen Dowd who took great exception to Clinton's show of emotion. What follows is the full quote, which I've also included despite its length because it is as impossible to summarize faithfully as it is to believe, and fully illustrates how Dowd “pilloried her” for what she saw as “a window into the dark part of Clinton's soul” (Allen).

There was a poignancy about the moment, seeing Hillary crack with exhaustion from decades of yearning to be the principal rather than the plus-one. But there was a whiff of Nixonian self-pity about her choking up. What was moving her so deeply was her recognition that the country was failing to grasp how much it needs her. In a weirdly narcissistic way, she was crying for us. But it was grimly typical of her that what finally made her break down was the prospect of losing.

As Spencer Tracy said to Katharine Hepburn in ‘Adam's Rib,’ ‘Here we go again, the old juice. Guaranteed heart melter. A few female tears, stronger than any acid’ (Allen).

All of these rules had a great impact on the coverage of Clinton during her 2016 presidential campaign, and while it's impossible to know if it was the determinative factor, "the media can definitely weigh down — and even destroy — a candidate" (Allen). I wouldn't be writing this thesis if I didn't believe that, and, more importantly, that its inverse, were true. Furthermore, as Allen rightly points out, "the emphasis on a candidate's flaws — real or perceived — comes," crucially in this case, "at the cost of negative attention to the other candidates." That's not to say that Trump didn't receive a great deal of negative attention, but rather that attention should have reflected the uniquely extreme actions that precipitated it, not helped it look equal to, or even normal, in relation to Clinton's flaws by both the tone of the coverage and the fact that both issues were put to identically structured panel debates.

## ii. The Clinton Rules at Work

One very illustrative example of this dynamic, working in concert with the media's continued devotion to quasi-libertarian principles of objectivity, was the coverage of Clinton's pneumonia in September of 2016. After video surfaced of her appearing to faint, a barrage of coverage ensued, from *NBC Special Reports*, to continuous coverage across all the major cable networks, including CNN. They took the "opportunity to continue to legitimize conspiracy theories about Clinton's health that have circulated in the conservative media" (Willis), a process that had already been going on in the weeks preceding the incident, with prominent Trump surrogate Rudy Giuliani alleging degenerative brain damage during his appearances on various cable networks and mainstream organizations writing speculative articles about a coughing fit.

For example, on *Meet the Press*, "Tom Brokaw...said he thought Clinton should "go to a hospital" and "see a neurologist and get a clean report if it's available to her," while *The Washington Post*'s Chris Cillizza "wrote a piece headlined, "Hillary Clinton's health just became

a real issue in the presidential campaign” (Willis). He was adamant that “the episode had ‘changed the conversation in the race about Clinton’s health’ and would ‘catapult questions about her health from the ranks of conservative conspiracy theory to perhaps the central debate in the presidential race over the coming days,’” and refused to take the “Clinton team's word for it on her health” (Willis). For *New York Times* Los Angeles bureau Chief Adam Nagourney, it was an issue with two sides, tweeting it “Feels like a good day for Clinton to release her medical records and call on Trump to do same” (Willis). Finally, on CNN, correspondent Jeff Zeleny said, “You have to wonder: Will they be sort of forced to release more medical records here because she is being criticized by her opponents here. The questions have been out there: Is she healthy?” (Willis).

Seemingly, journalists were so eager for a “gotcha” moment with Clinton, that they failed to call out a far-right conspiracy theory, allowing the absurd idea that Clinton had Parkinson’s or some variation thereof to become a topic of debate and consequently part of the public consciousness.

Another illustrative example of the Clinton Rules is the coverage of the candidates’ respective foundations. *The Washington Post*’s David Farenhold did Pulitzer-worthy work (literally, he’s been nominated for a Pulitzer), investigating the Trump Foundation and finding that they had given almost no money to charity, donated \$25,000 dollars to a state attorney general investigating the fraudulent Trump University, and, perhaps most memorably, once used donations to buy an enormous portrait of Donald Trump himself. Yet, what got three times as much coverage on CNN and across the mainstream media, were nebulous, embellished, and arguably imagined stories about the Clinton Global Initiative (Alderman). In comparison to Donald Trump, there was no real evidence of any wrongdoing, with most stories seemingly

adapting the narrative from the shoddily researched *Clinton Cash*, written by known Clinton conspiracy theorist and Steve Bannon associate, Peter Schweizer. Some highlights include the AP's story alleging half of all her meetings at the State Department were with CGI donors while ignoring well over 1,000 other meetings and *The New York Times*'s headline, "Emails Raise New Questions About Clinton Foundation Ties to State Department," above an article that failed to provide evidence for the existence of those new questions.

All this does appear to lay the groundwork for an argument that the devotion to objectivity as it pertained to Trump during the election was encouraged, if not a consequence of, Clinton's presence in the race. However, this line of thinking ignores the fact that the media's objective position on Trump's racism predates the general election. Just look at perhaps the most striking example of this, the Lord/Jones KKK debate, which occurred during the Republican primary when he was unquestionably the frontrunner but not the nominee. Or, if you prefer, we can look at how CNN and essentially every other network allowed Trump's baseless wiretapping allegations regarding former President Obama to become a topic of debate, defended and thus legitimized on various panel discussions, rather than dismissed on its ridiculous merits after his inauguration. Sticking strictly to issues of race, we could also look at the less than vehement response to the recent comments made by Iowa Representative Steve King, where he advocated for racial purity and spoke about "someone else's babies" ("Tucker Carlson Defends"). That is an example that features neither Clinton nor Trump, and as such, probably serves as the best argument for normalization as a generic failure.

#### IV. Moral Responsibility in Cable News

When I talk about the genre-specific failure of cable news in the 2016 election I'm not absolving the networks themselves of blame, because genre is not in and of itself a prison. As aforementioned, the social responsibility theory of the press really flourished post-WWII after Hitler's rise, precisely because journalists found it dangerous to adhere to libertarian principles after covering such a subject. Regardless of that theory though, there is still room to stretch the idea of objectivity to the breaking point in libertarianism. That's why this chapter is focused on the press' response to the Civil Rights Movement, a time when American journalists had to make a similar decision about objectivity; only this time the subject was much closer to home. Additionally, given my focus on Donald Trump's racism, I think a review of how earlier journalists handled racially charged subjects, as well as events, is particularly relevant.

A good place to begin is the Emmet Till trial, which followed the brutal 1955 murder of a young black boy in Mississippi, who was visiting the South from Chicago, in retribution for allegedly "acting fresh" at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant. Till was only fourteen, but he was abducted from his home by Bryant's husband and brother-in-law, brutally beaten, lynched, shot in the head, and finally, tied to cotton gin fan and sunk into the Tallahatchie River. It was a galvanizing event for both the Civil Rights Movement and the perception of Southern racism among Americans at large.

It wasn't the major turning point for the mainstream white press though, with exhibit A being prominent *New York Times* columnist John Popham. For Popham, "the Till trail was a low point," though not for the reasons one would assume, because while this may not have been *the* turning point for the press, the seeds of the new kind of coverage that was coming, one where journalists and editors "picked a side" in his view, were being sown (Roberts and Klibanoff 106).

Regardless of the coverage from smaller circulations, the *Times* remained sympathetic to Popham's view though, and "he was pleased that his coverage, painting a South of variegated beliefs, had been well-received...feeling that the judge and the prosecutor, white men with deep southern roots, had been fair and responsible" (Roberts and Klibanoff 106). It should be noted that neither the judge, the prosecutor, nor the trial was fair. With the perspective of several decades of racial progress we all recognize this as unassailable fact, but even in 1955 a prosecutor using his closing statement to argue that Till's murderers had "every right to discipline him" and baldly state that, "As a Southerner born and bred, I know the worst possible punishment for this boy was to take a razor strap, turn him over a barrel, and give him a little whipping," is far too egregious for any responsible press to ignore (Roberts and Klibanoff 100). It follows, therefore, that Popham, much like his cable news successors, was quite irresponsible, made clearer by his realization after the trial that the *Times*' "'handling of the Till case may be the last time anyone is going to be able to get out and get decent respect for balanced coverage"' (Roberts and Klibanoff 106).

However, what is perhaps most disturbing about Popham's views on how to cover the racial tension exploding across the South was that it was not unique. A year after the trial the paper published an eight-page "Report on the South" that utterly failed to "measure the depth of the segregationist feeling" or recognize the rising Civil Rights Movement, and so "the newspaper's own conclusions misguided the editors and led them to some ill-advised decisions in their coverage of the South over the next two years" (Roberts and Klibanoff 111). Yet here again, the most disturbing facet was the near ubiquity of the ensuing failure. It occurred often across the "newsrooms of the Southern newspapers where the stories of massive and passive resistance were playing out," where the press even "sometimes served as adjunct investigative

bodies for law enforcement in trying to squeeze out whodunit information about the leadership of the civil rights protests” (Roberts and Klibanoff 111).

The reckoning for this type of coverage came in September of 1957 when nine students, who would come to be known as the Little Rock Nine, attempted to enter Little Rock Central High, which up till then had been a whites-only school. Following the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954, segregated schools became illegal, though it would take decades for that ruling to be fully implemented. However, the Little Rock School Board was willing to comply with federal law much earlier and chose nine high-achieving African-American students to attend the high school. Their names were Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Minnijean Brown, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Thelma Mothershed, and Melba Pattillo Beals. What followed is well known, from jeering racist protestors on the lawn to the call-up of the National Guard, and the coverage of that incident would capture the minds and hearts of many journalists who were covering it.

Yet perhaps more important than what would be written, was the presence of the news cameras that would transmit the images of nine young black teenagers being accosted while simply trying to attend school. As I’ll touch on later, the visceral reaction that visual coverage would inspire would change the Civil Rights Movement, and the television coverage that accompanied the saga in Little Rock “was provocative and in some ways confusing.” It was here that the national press “picked their side,” so to speak, and where the line between reporter and commentator began to blur. Compared to modern day CNN panels it was rather subtle with only “words, phrasings, tones, and inflections,” but nevertheless, it became “a concern to some television critics and certainly to the segregationists.” Across television, limited as it was in the late 1950s and early 60s, networks had pledged “to keep opinion out of newscasts” when it came

to the Civil Rights Movement, but that “pledge seemed to dissipate at Little Rock.” It was where “all of the newscasters” became “‘analysts’ and ‘commentators’ with a free rein to speak their own minds about what is right and what is wrong in the integration dispute,” a choice that would lead to important realizations in the Fourth Estate (Roberts and Klibanoff 182).

One of those realizations would come from prominent Atlanta journalist Ralph Emerson McGill, who came to believe that his fellow journalists had become “mindless, robotic followers of the ‘cult of objectivity’ at the expense of truth.” In statements that would turn out to be incredibly prescient, McGill argued that as essential as a basic attitude of fairness towards one’s subjects was, there was no point to “purely objective news presentations if that meant the truth got lost in the process.” Crucially, he recognized that both the news and social environment had changed, which was why he categorized objectivity as an “anachronistic antidote” to the problems of an almost obsolete form of journalism, one which I discussed in an earlier chapter, “when publishers had been wild and reckless in pushing their biases into the newspapers.” That libertarian formula, of” printing all sides of the story—sometimes in the same number of words or paragraphs—and leaving readers to make their own choices,” gave equal weight to segregationists and activists in his eyes, an idea he was deeply troubled by. In fact, McGill even went so far as to say that the mission of newspapers “had become neutered” (Roberts and Klibanoff 206).

In another incredibly prescient statement which eerily mirrors much of the coverage of Donald Trump, McGill lamented the fact that “if a public figure said something that was untrue or mischaracterized the situation,” or to put it more bluntly, if they uttered bald-faced lies, “most newspapers wouldn’t report the falsity unless the reporter could get someone else to point it out. And if that someone else stretched the truth...newspapers devoted to blind objectivity found



themselves in a bind, printing two falsities” (Roberts and Klibanoff 206). This reticence to call a lie a lie was one of the chief criticisms of journalists both then and now, and despite the clear good-faith effort behind the practice, it nevertheless encourages those with the least respect for truthful, unbiased, and factual reporting to take advantage of the press.

This is exactly what happened with three segregationist, Southern journalists, Tom Waring, Jack Kilpatrick, and Grover Hall, who “complained frequently that a ‘paper curtain’ had been drawn along the Mason-Dixon line,” believing that the North had a “blatant disregard for the southern point of view,” leading one of them, Waring, to push the issue with *Harper’s* magazine, a prominent publication at the time. That magazine’s editor, Jon Fischer, inured to the “cult of objectivity” described by McGill, “felt that the Southern position on segregation was repugnant but was impressed that intelligent southerners of otherwise good disposition quite plainly held it,” and so he asked Waring to write up ““a statement of the pro-segregation position which Northerners and anti-segregation Southerners of both races would recognize as an unemotional, sober statement, motivated by good will and useable as a starting point for rational discussion.”” Fischer’s mistake, much like the mistake made by the executives and editors at CNN, was that he believed that there could ever be a rational discussion when one side’s argument rested entirely on the conceit that an entire ethnic group was fundamentally less human than white Americans. This was borne out in Waring’s writing, which, among other things, alleged that “Negros” were “primitive, disease-ridden, immoral, disorderly, and intellectually crippled,” which when laid out, frankly sounds a lot like “Mexicans are murderers and rapists” (Roberts and Klibanoff 212).

For Richmond editor James J. Kilpatrick’s part, his contribution to the idea of objectivity in reporting on issues of race was multiple hostile letters to the *New York Times*, where he

castigated them for their “‘astonishing distortion of the truth.’” In one particularly memorable and disturbing personal letter to the editor, Kilpatrick asked, “‘Is the Times so afflicted with Negrophilia that old considerations of honest and impartial reporting no longer matter?’” I wanted to quote this particular letter both for its blatant racism and reference to “impartial reporting,” but also to call out the fact that it was by no means an uncommon occurrence at the *Times*. It was “‘part of a day-in, day-out pattern that we are getting pretty God-damned sick of,’” to quote one frustrated editor (Roberts and Klibanoff 212).

However, I don’t want to give the impression here that McGill was the only journalist speaking out about the “cult of objectivity.” There were others, including Howard Smith, who unlike McGill, worked in television news at CBS. Smith similarly thought that “if you tried to balance the racial story, the network would give the same weight to Bull Connor’s notion of law as it would to the U.S. Supreme Court’s decisions,” which was an instinct that would be proved right many decades later, when CNN and its peers gave equal weight to Trump’s fabricated reality regarding crime, immigration, and terrorism as they did to the actual (contradictory) facts and statistics around those issues. Evocatively, he once wrote that this was “‘equivalent to saying that truth is to be found somewhere between right and wrong, equidistant between good and evil.’” Though in an illustration of the field-wide epiphany that still needed to happen, CBS chairman William S. Paley was so angry over Smith’s coverage that he confronted him in person. During that confrontation, he “tossed the paper on the table and said he had heard ‘this junk’ before and was not going to permit editorial opinions in television newscasts” and demanded that Smith edit what he wrote, resulting in Smith walking away from his twenty-year position at the network in protest (Roberts and Klibanoff 252).

I also want to talk about the Civil Rights campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. The violence of that campaign is widely credited with turning “the nation’s sympathies toward the Civil Rights Movement,” and it should also be credited with turning many journalists toward McGill and Smith’s point of view. For many of the journalists and editors in the city it was the “meanness and brutality of the resistance” that shocked them awake, to the point that they “began admiring the courage of the movement’s leaders.” One photojournalist, Charles Moore, was so moved that he stated that while he “respected the point and purpose of photojournalistic objectivity...he had concluded, through the lens, that there was a right side and a wrong side”, which while blunt, was undeniably necessary in an environment where police dogs and firehoses were used on black teenagers and the elderly (Roberts and Klibanoff 324).

The changing attitude of the journalists who covered the Civil Rights Movement was astoundingly important, both for the way it challenged the idea of blind objectivity and the material support it gave the activists it covered. The country saw a news drama where peaceful black protestors were brutally beaten by racist police officers on horseback on the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma and it moved them to support historical legislation. It’s trading in hypotheticals to imagine what would have happened if the press had remained committed to the “cult of objectivity,” but certainly many black Americans felt that the press later abandoned them, which did coincide with a noticeable shift in public opinion and political capital.

In this, I am referring to the violence of the late sixties and early seventies, and as it escalated, “blacks complained that television portrayed the militancy of black power without explaining that it could be regarded as an understandable reaction to persistent white racism.” In criticism that would, again, be echoed decades later after violent riots in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, black Americans said that “television was ‘simplistically’ focusing on the violence

and mayhem of the riots without devoting equal time to the underlying problems of urban blacks.” As a result, “the movement never recovered from the one-two punch of urban rioting and the schism over black power, black nationalism, and militancy” (Roberts and Klibanoff 400).

Finally, I’d like to conclude this subsection with some thoughts from John Lewis, a Civil Rights veteran, genuine American hero, and, relevantly, an outspoken critic of Donald Trump. He has spoken at length about the role of the press in the Civil Rights Movement, and for him, “his greatest fear—and his greatest understanding of the power of press—came in Mississippi when officers hauled Freedom Riders away from reporters and to the remote, desolate Parchman State Penitentiary.” It was there that he says he understood the significance of “the guard’s sneering comment, ‘Ain’t no newspapermen out here,’” both for his own safety and for the success of the larger movement. In fact, in Lewis’ view, the Civil Rights Movement succeeded precisely “‘because we had a group of men and women who were prepared to get up there to write the words or shoot the pictures, capture the sound. And I think that’s changed the face of the South and, in changing the face of the South, changed this nation once and for all’” (Roberts and Klibanoff 407).

However, the Lewis quote I really want to focus on is this: “‘If it hadn’t been for the media—the print media and television—the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings, a choir without a song’” (Roberts and Klibanoff 407). Arguably, the successful campaign of Donald Trump is a result, at least in part, of a television media, and not all of print media is exempt either, that remained devoted to the “cult of objectivity” in the face of blatant racism and misogyny and blatant, bald-faced lies. That is the inverse of what was discussed in this chapter. The aforementioned cult has existed for more than a century at this point, so, in effect, the rules of the genre as described in earlier chapters is not that different from the rules

that governed the press at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. The difference is that the journalists of the 1950s and 60s, when faced with a choice between morality and objectivity, and I use “morality” here as a matter of definition, not judgement, made the moral choice. As I said up top, genre is not a prison, so in order to think critically about the overall failure of an entire genre of news, it behooves us to recognize the parallels in the nature and coverage of Donald Trump’s campaign and the Civil Rights Movement, as well where they diverged. We would do well to notice that the journalists of that earlier era made a different, more moral choice.

## V. Conclusion

When I began my thesis, I believed, like the majority of Americans, that Donald Trump would never be president. His election reshaped my project and forced me not just to analyze the ways in which a commitment to the libertarian theory of the press and blind objectivity impacted CNN's election coverage, but to also think about how it contributed to his victory. It also forced me to see that that commitment was not a fluke, brought about by a bizarre election with two universally recognized candidates. There have been many instances since November 8<sup>th</sup> when I've looked at the coverage he's received, from giving his children top-secret clearance to attacking the judiciary after multiple judges struck down the (Muslim) Travel Ban, and recognized the continuing struggle of so many in the press to fully, completely reject the "cult of objectivity," even as they do make strides in holding him accountable. Those instances are not discussed here in detail here because they go beyond the parameters of this thesis and, indeed, including all of them would turn this into a rather lengthy book, but I want to acknowledge them at least tangentially, because those instances are a mark of the failure of cable news as a genre.

I discussed in this thesis how the democratizing power of the internet bifurcated the press to such an extent that we've entered an almost neo-nineteenth-century epoch in journalism, in terms of the level of partisanship in our news sources, and in a post-election review of the media's campaign coverage, the *Columbia Journalism Review* came to much of the same conclusions that I did. That trickle-up of conspiracy theory and racially tinged commentary is what allowed right-wing media to be "able to bring the focus on immigration, Clinton emails, and scandals more generally to the broader media environment" (Benkler et al). The *CJR*'s sentence-level analysis of "stories throughout the media environment" bears this out, suggesting

that “Donald Trump’s substantive agenda—heavily focused on immigration and direct attacks on Hillary Clinton—came to dominate public discussions” (Benkler et al).

Other post-election analysis has said much the same thing, with the Harvard Kennedy School titling their post-mortem, *News Coverage of the 2016 Election: How the Press Failed the Voters*. In a gripping review, what stood out most to me was this concluding paragraph:

And false equivalencies are developing on a grand scale as a result of relentlessly negative news. If everything and everyone is portrayed negatively, there’s a leveling effect that opens the door to charlatans. The press historically has helped citizens recognize the difference between the earnest politician and the pretender. Today’s news coverage blurs the distinction. (Patterson)

Their post-election analysis had many gripping election-specific lines that I could have included instead, but I chose to focus on this paragraph precisely because it reaches beyond the election. I chose to focus on how the genre of cable news, exemplified by CNN, normalized Donald Trump’s comments during the election and I hope I’ve succeeded, but that normalization was a result of that specific genre, not the election. I think the above quote illustrates the dangers of a genre inherently vulnerable to demagogues due to some unique and specific failures.

I draw attention to this here, at the end of my thesis, because I believe the Trump presidency will be one of the most challenging periods of time for American journalism since its beginnings in the eighteenth century. While there is obvious economic incentive to try to lure in partisans tempted away by sites like *Breitbart*, my advice and the advice of the *CJR* for traditional media is reorientation, not “developing better viral content and clickbait to compete in the social media environment,” but “recognizing that it is operating in a propaganda and

disinformation-rich environment” (Benkler et al). To quote the *Columbia Journalism Review* one last time, it is this environment “not Macedonian teenagers or Facebook,” that is “the real challenge of the coming years,” and “rising to this challenge could usher in a new golden age for the Fourth Estate” (Benkler et al).

The danger inherent in failing to meet this challenge points us toward a future in which the authoritarian theory of the press becomes more relevant than either the social responsibility or libertarian theories. Fred Siebert and his fellow scholars offer us a look at that future, and it is one that already bears an unsettling resemblance to our present. As I worked on this thesis Donald Trump gave CNN a new title, Fake News™, invaliding their critical investigation into, among other things, his campaign’s suspected collusion with the Russian government. He’s attacked multiple networks and newspapers, even denying access to some. Fringe sites that are little more than state propaganda at this point, like *The Gateway Pundit*, have received White House press credentials. And as I was writing this conclusion, Press Secretary Sean Spicer, in the latest of the falsehood-laden daily briefings, defended Trump’s escalation into the Syrian civil war by trying to claim Adolf Hitler never used chemical weapons on his own people and calling concentration camps “Holocaust centers,” leading to an MSNBC news chyron that included the clarification “Hitler gassed millions” in parentheses. When Siebert describes a press in which the “the state actively participates in the communication process” and utilizes mass media as a propaganda tool (18), it’s hard not to think of *Breitbart* and *The Gateway Pundit* being called on at a press conference while *The Washington Post* gets ignored. When someone sardonically uses the term Fake News™ now it’s easy to laugh, but I find it hard not to think about the fact that under authoritarians “the methods devised” are “less obvious in their purposes and more devious in their operation” (Siebert 25), and invalidating all news stories and sources



that portray a certain political figure negatively sounds is a prime example. Even the idea of “opposition editors...alternatively threatened with prosecution and seduced with bribes” remains at least a disturbing possibility (Siebert 25), particularly in light of Donald Trump’s well-documented libel and slander suits, as well as his more recent threats of legal action against various publications.

Of course, the idea of an authoritarian theory of the press in the United States of America is, at least for now, hypothetical, but the genre of cable news carries inherent flaws that can easily be taken advantage of, particularly in a culture where the “cult of objectivity” still dominates a media environment in technological and theoretical flux between social responsibility and libertarianism. It is why CNN and the genre of cable news failed in this election, normalizing racism, sexism, xenophobia, and islamophobia, and so I end on this note in the hope that it will evolve in this new Trump epoch and succeed where it failed last year.

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